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SUBJECT Interview with Frank Snepp

DENNIS WHOLEY: Frank Snepp is our guest right now. Frank is a former CIA agent. He was awarded the Medal of Merit for his work in Vietnam. His book "Decent Interval" calls the evacuation of Saigon a fiasco, and he criticizes the CIA for stupidity and mismanagement. The Justice Department sued, claiming that Snepp's book broke his secrecy agreement and caused harm to the national security. The Supreme Court upheld that ruling.

Kind of a broad question, putting it out on the table right now: Should former agents of the CIA be allowed to criticize the agency, or, in some cases, use their knowledge, their experience or their expertise in civilian life?

Good to have you here.

FRANK SNEPP: Thank you.

WHOLEY: The last four or five years, how has this book changed your life?

SNEPP: Well, it's changed my life in many ways. One thing, it has turned my name into an italicized synonym for government censorship. The Supreme Court ruling in my case, in fact, gives legitimacy, for the first time, to an American official secrets act.

In your introduction you left out one important fact about my situation, and that is, I was never accused of publishing any secrets in that book.

WHOLEY: True?

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SNEPP: So I was impoverished, and also socked with a gag order, simply for ignoring the CIA's censorship program. And it has left me -- the decision has left me very much in a quandary and somewhat disillusioned about the state of the law in the country. My father is a superior court judge in North Carolina. I was brought up to respect the law. And I expected better from the law than I got.

So, I have spent -- rounding out my answer to your question. I've spent the past two or three years acquainting myself with First Amendment law, and I spend a great deal of time now writing about it. And I am working on a book for my publisher, Random House, which will deal with my case and other national security cases which likewise have altered the meaning of the First Amendment in this country.

WHOLEY: Do you have to submit the new manuscript to the CIA for their approval?

SNEPP: Oh, yes indeed. In fact, I have to submit even my speeches to the CIA for clearance. And the agency now maintains, at least according to its latest pronouncements -- and they seem to change from week to week. The agency claims that even material which I did not learn as a result of my employment, independent of my employment, is subject to their censorship as well. In other words, I left government service lobotomized. I cannot, in effect, speak about intelligence-related matters or topics bearing thereon without the government's sufferance.

WHOLEY: When you left the service, or before you left the service, as I understand it, after the fall of Saigon -- and I understand from many, many testimonials that you were an incredible intelligence officer, many testimonials coming your way -- that you approached some members in the CIA to try to get them to do a report, do a look -- a damage assessment, I think, quote-unquote, are the words that come to my mind -- of what happened in Vietnam, and especially the evacuation part. And you were turned down. Too complicated, quote-unquote, you're writing. I'm not sure exactly you were quoting there. So you ended up deciding that you'd better do it yourself.

Is that roughly the case?

SNEPP: That's precisely so.

WHOLEY: In a sentence or two -- and that is unfair, because this is a book that obviously you worked at for a long, long time, personal experience and research. In a couple of sentences, though, what do you say in the book, "Decent Interval," about the conduct of the United States policy in South Vietnam?

SNEPP: The book is not designed to be a critique of

U.S. policy in Vietnam. It's designed to draw some inferences from the experience of the CIA there, some lessons which I wish we learned. If we had, we might not have ended up as we did in Iran.

For instance, in Vietnam we embraced Nguyen Van Thieu, the last South Vietnamese president, as vigorously as we had ever embraced the Shah; and we blinded ourselves to Thieu's weaknesses, just as we blinded ourselves to the Shah's weaknesses and to the corruption around him, which finally helped to do him in.

If we had looked at the lessons of Vietnam and what had happened during the last two years of the war, very possibly our intelligence analysts could have done a better job in assessing the evolving crisis in Iran. Very possibly, too, they might have avoided the hostage-taking. Certainly we could have avoided, if we'd learned anything from what happened in Saigon, we could have avoided the loss of all the documents, the intelligence materials which were left behind in the embassy in Teheran.

WHOLEY: What could have been learned in Vietnam that would have prevented, say, the taking of the hostages?

SNEPP: Well, when you begin seeing a situation destabilize, as was quite apparent in the latter part of 1978, then you begin drawing down, you begin drawing down your manpower, you begin drawing down American personnel. You don't let American companies keep their people there as long as Ambassador Sullivan did.

WHOLEY: As an intelligence agency operating throughout the world, how would you rate the CIA on a scale of zero to 100?

SNEPP: The CIA is an excellent intelligence organization, so long as it remains unpoliticized. I'm afraid right now that another lesson we didn't learn from Vietnam is that you should not politicize intelligence. The Reagan Administration is again moving in that direction. Witness the fact that Reagan's own campaign manager is now head of the CIA. That's...

WHOLEY: In itself, that's not...

SNEPP: ...the most blatant example.

WHOLEY: Well, in itself, that doesn't necessarily have to work against him.

SNEPP: It doesn't have to work against him. But I should think that it would be far more prudent -- in fact, it would be consistent with patterns of the past -- to bring in professionals, or at least an outsider who is not so very close to the President.

WHOLEY: On a scale of zero to 100, how do you rate them?

SNEPP: I would say that the agency is somewhere around 40.

WHOLEY: Forty?

SNEPP: Yes.

WHOLEY: In what areas would you criticize them?

SNEPP: I would say the CIA's analysis is not up to par; again, because of a politicizing process that is taking place -- that has taken place.

Just to give you an example, we were so fixed on the notion that the Soviets were going to intervene in Poland that all of our intelligence analyses throughout the government, beginning with the CIA's, were keyed to that assumption; and so was our contingency planning. The analyses were wrong, the contingency planning was off. The crackdown was undertaken by the Polish government itself. That's what happens when induction takes the place of deduction in the analytical process.

WHOLEY: They did invade Poland. They did go into Poland. The Russians did go into Poland. Huh?

SNEPP: Well, the russians certainly pulled the strings. But our analyses anticipated direct Soviet intervention, not indirect via the Polish government itself.

WHOLEY: So you fault them on analysis. What area -- other areas do you fault them on?

SNEPP: Well, we are very weak, and have been up until Casey's taking charge, in the covert action area. I am one of these people who believes...

WHOLEY: What is covert action?

SNEPP: Covert action is dirty tricks: destabilization of governments, the spreading of propaganda, even paramilitary operations.

During the regime of Stansfield Turner, the agency's paramilitary and covert action and clandestine apparatus was very -- well, it was drawn down.

WHOLEY: Invent an action for us out of your head that you think we might -- should very well be involved in.

SNEPP: Well, I think it would be very prudent for us to arm the Afghan rebels. And, in fact, we're trying to do so. I think it would be very prudent for us also to -- well, look at the Afghan rebel situation for a moment. The Afghan -- when the Afghan crisis began to heat up, we discovered that we had very few people on staff who could speak the native language of the country. That was how bad our covert action apparatus -- what terrible shape it was in when that crisis began to materialize.

WHOLEY: What do you know about what's going on in El Salvador?

SNEPP: El Salvador is outside my account, and it's something that I can only comment on from reading the newspapers.

WHOLEY: You're on PBS Late Night.

MAN: People, I think, take it for granted that you have to have a certain level of education to join the CIA. How can anybody with such a level of education sign an unlimited document, the secret [unintelligible]?

I know a little about the MI5 and 6 in Britain, and they have a 10 year limit. Why on earth would anybody sign such a document?

WHOLEY: Are we talking about the oath?

SNEPP: We're talking about the secrecy agreement. And as a matter of fact, I had the same question when I went into the agency, and I asked the briefing officer whether or not this document I was signing meant that I couldn't write any letters home. Because if it's read literally, that's precisely the kind of stricture it places on you. It says you cannot divulge anything you learn about as a result of your employment. The briefing officer told me no, and I believed him.

When I left the agency, I signed another secrecy agreement. That one was more limited and far more reasonable. It said the only thing I had to clear with the agency was secrets or confidential information. I have not disclosed either type of information. So I've lived up to that secrecy agreement.

That, I think, is a reasonable stricture on someone who has had access to intelligence material. They shouldn't be in a position to exploit classified information for their own profit.

WHOLEY: You're on PBS Late Night.

MAN: My point of view is this: The Central Intelligence Agency serves multinational corporate interests and not

the public's. Primarily, they benefit from CIA operations in unfriendly nations by the covert destabilizing activities that you mentioned, such as media manipulation. A couple of examples are El Mercurio from Chile, which is the major national newspaper there, and a major newspaper in Jamaica. Specifically, the training of SAVAK, LSD and mind-control experiments, assassination plots I don't view as a very good mark of a responsible agency in a free country, supposedly, as America is.

My question is this: The CIA charter apparently is now being violated by the granting of domestic surveillance activities. I really view this as a return to the Nixon years or worse, 1984.

What's the comment on that?

WHOLEY: Okay. Let's get a comment.

SNEPP: [Laughter] An awful lot to comment on.

WHOLEY: Yeah. The interesting one, because [he] raises it and I had it down as a note also, is what do you think about the CIA now being operative within the United States?

SNEPP: It's an insult to the FBI. Stansfield Turner, with whom I do not always agree, said the other day in the Washington Post that the agency shouldn't be in domestic operations because agency personnel are not trained in obeying the law. I think he's right. I think the FBI is perfectly well equipped or capable of handling the counterintelligence task here in the United States. The agency doesn't need to get into that particular field.

Looking back at some of the other matters which the gentleman on the line brought up. It would be very nice if this were not a Hobbesian world and it would be very nice if there was not a KGB or the Cuban DGI or any of the other hobgoblins around that one has to deal with in the shadowy world of espionage. They exist, however. And, frankly, you can't wish them away, and you have to deal with them, in a way, on their own terms.

So, I cannot fault the agency for having a covert action arm or for even running certain covert action or dirty tricks operations that we've seen in the past.

WHOLEY: You're on the air.

WOMAN: I have a question concerning a possible solution. If we are indeed to keep intelligence in the Central Intelligence Agency and attract intelligent personnel to that service, it seems absolutely absurd to think that we can muzzle

a thinking mind for an indefinite period. Is there not a possibility that some use could be made of a neutral arbitrator, let's say in the form of a legal person who would not be on the Supreme Court, who would not be politically involved with the President or anyone else in the government?

WHOLEY: Well, the Supreme Court's not supposed to be involved with the President. It went there and the vote was six to three. Huh?

SNEPP: That's right. And besides that, the CIA refuses to allow anyone to arbitrate questions that bear on its interests. And we asked at one point that an agency censor -- or that the agency tolerate an outside censor to look over the material written by agency operatives; and the agency said no, that it retained that right for itself.

I want to bring out something which we haven't dealt with quite yet. My predicament is not peculiar to CIA operatives. The Supreme Court ruling in my case was so broadly cast that now the mantle of censorship is thrown over every government official who is in a trusted position. You don't have to sign a secrecy agreement to become subject to the same strictures that apply to me. The only thing you have to do is to assume a position of trust in the government. And Big Brother can then demand to look at what you write and can delete anything Big Brother thinks is classifiable, not merely classified. And that is the real danger of what the Supreme Court did to me.

My situation is meaningless. It's the growth of government -- or I should say censorship-by-lawsuit that I'm most concerned about.

WHOLEY: You're on PBS Late Night.

WOMAN: I have a very interesting question. I assume that Mr. Snapp is aware of the fact that the disclosure by CIA agents on TV in reference to what has occurred in Vietnam and the covert actions and -- actually, we have [unintelligible] General Westmoreland and Secretary Graham have sold out the American GIs in Vietnam. It has been disclosed by CIA agents openly on TV.

Why is no follow-up taken [unintelligible] case here? Mr. Graham is still Secretary of the Intelligence in the Pentagon today, And was openly disclosed by several agents as being a traitor, because this whole Vietnam War was lost on account of the cover-up of General Westmoreland and Mr. Graham.

WHOLEY: Okay.

WOMAN: Are you aware of this?

WHOLEY: Okay. Hold on a second.

You wouldn't go so far as to call Ambassador Graham a traitor, would you?

SNEPP: Well, the lady is not referring to Graham Martin. She's referring to General Daniel Graham.

WHOLEY: Ah-ha.

SNEPP: No, I wouldn't refer to him as a traitor. But the lady has a point.

What happened right before the Tet '68 offensive was that somebody -- and we can't quite be sure whom -- decided to cook the figures relating to the size of the Communist force structure in South Vietnam. The American military wanted to believe that it was winning the war. And so somebody along the line said, "Let's deflate our estimates which reflect how big the enemy army is. Let's cut it down to 250,000."

Well, a CIA analyst, who happens to be a friend of mine, came up with double that figure by looking at captured documents and what have you. And his estimate was thrown out. His estimate was rejected by Richard Helms, by George Carver, by lots of other people in the CIA hierarchy, and by Daniel Graham, who was General Westmoreland's -- one of his intelligence chiefs, I believe, at that particular time.

Well, the Communists launched the Tet offensive with the Communist forces that the American military had refused to acknowledge existed. And somebody has the blood of American boys on their hands, the boys who died in that offensive.

That is not dealt with in my book. It is going to be dealt with in a book written, with the CIA's clearance, by the CIA analyst involved.

WHOLEY: Different than you.

SNEPP: It's not me, no.

WHOLEY: It's not you.

But you do suggest in your book from time to time that, many times, intelligence officers of the CIA gave information and that information was rejected. Huh?

SNEPP: That's right. It is characteristic of the intelligence business that, unfortunately, that when you have a very hot, critical situation, there are very, oh, very firm views at the top. And when that happens, it's difficult to move contrary

views up the system.

WHOLEY: Can I just run some names by you? And we'll get back to the phones in a second. I want to take you here -- you write this book, and the CIA, the Federal Government, the Supreme Court, they jump all over you. And you're thing is, "I tried to get a report done. Nobody would listen. I thought it was important. I did it." I gather there's some kind of a higher morality thing that you have in your mind. And you say, "I didn't give away any classified secrets." Right?

SNEPP: I don't say it. The government conceded that I gave away no secrets.

WHOLEY: Okay. What's your view of CIA agents like Frank Terpil and Edwin Wilson? They're the people who are allegedly tied up with Qaddafi?

SNEPP: I think they're a disgrace to the organization. These gentlemen have been, since 1976, as the CIA knows, been dealing with Libyan terrorists, and also with Idi Amin. They should have been reined in. They could have been reined in using the same principles that were marshaled against me in my case. They had signed the secrecy agreements. They were in positions of trust, with implicit obligations not to exploit the information they learned on the job. They did so in the training of terrorists.

They have not been reined in. Why not? Why were they allowed to operate up until 1980, when they were finally indicted, with pretty much a free hand? The answer is simple. The CIA has a lot of alumni who are out there making money off of their agency experience. Richard Helms runs a consultancy agency. So does William Colby. As a lawyer, he is a consultant to the Japanese. The list goes on and on. Vernon Walters, the Deputy Director, is also a foreign consultant.

If you began pulling in the Wilson and Terpils, you would set a precedent for suits against these much more respectable gentlemen. And, in fact, you would make it impossible for any CIA operative or analyst to leave the agency and take any job on the outside. So...

WHOLEY: How do you draw the line?

SNEPP: Well, the government has drawn the line. It says that you can't write, but you can disclose by sales pitch. It's a double standard.

WHOLEY: Do you think that the CIA has known what Wilson and Terpil have been up to and given them a nod?

10

SNEPP: If the CIA didn't know what Wilson and Terpil were up to beginning in 1976, it wasn't doing its job. And there is now a witness who's come forward who says that the agency did indeed indicate to Wilson, at least as of 1977, that he should go ahead and collect intelligence on Qaddafi.

WHOLEY: How about people like Agee and Stockwell? Stockwell blew the thing on Angola, as I recall.

SNEPP: Well, Philip Agee I regard as really a coward. Agee has made a career of blowing the names of CIA agents. That's one thing. If you want to do that, all right. But why not divide some time between the CIA and the KGB? He seems to think that only the CIA commits the sins of the world. If he's going to blow names for moral reasons, why not blow some KGB operatives' names or Cuban operatives' names? He has a very selective sense of outrage.

In addition, he has -- he's done something which I think is even worse. He's failed to face the music. He's stayed abroad. He has not been willing to face up to the legal consequences of his actions. Only as a result of the lawsuit against me and several legal glitches has he finally been gagged.

WHOLEY: So you're saying that people who work for the CIA over a period of time, other than material which is confidential or would hurt the United States in some way -- and you define this for me. I'm not putting words in your mouth...

SNEPP: It's very simple. A CIA operative or a trusted government employee, be he Henry Kissinger or Brzezinski or William Colby, has no right to exploit classified information for his own profit. Otherwise...

WHOLEY: Anything goes.

SNEPP: Everything goes.

WHOLEY: You're on PBS Late Night.

MAN: I'd like to ask Mr. Snapp a question. He's evaluated the effectiveness of the CIA on a scale of zero to 100 at about 40. I'd like to know if he's prepared to evaluate on the same scale the KGB.

WHOLEY: Terrific question. Terrific.

SNEPP: The KGB is further down the list, or further down the scale. The KGB operates on a vacuum cleaner principle. It's a huge organization, about 70,000 operatives or personnel, as opposed to 15,000 for the CIA. And it picks up every kind of information, every piece of intelligence it can. But it has

11

no analytical capability, because the Politburo knows that knowledge is power. So the final analytical arm of the Soviet system, or analytical branch of its intelligence apparatus, is in fact the Politburo, and it does impose a bias on the intelligence as it makes its way up the system.

Therefore, its analysis is not very good, although it does pull in a great deal of information.

The same is true of the Chinese. They operate on the vacuum cleaner approach.

WHOLEY: Is there any agency floating around in another country which you think is terrific?

SNEPP: I think the Israelis are terrific because they have a national purpose behind them that enables them to do a lot of unscrupulous things which American intelligence couldn't do. And the British are very good because they're very small.

WHOLEY: What marks?

SHEPP: Huh?

WHOLEY: What marks for Britain, zero to 100?

SNEPP: I would say they're about 75.

WHOLEY: And the Israelis?

SNEPP: They're about 75 to 80.

WHOLEY: We're at the end of our half-hour.

Frank's book is called "Decent Interval."

Do you get any money for these books?

SNEPP: No. A hundred sixty-three thousand dollars has accumulated in the U.S. Treasury thanks to that book.

WHOLEY: And if we all wanted to read a good book on the CIA, or a good film, what one comes to your mind that you think is a pretty good picture?

SNEPP: Well...

WHOLEY: Oh, is that the one you're going to push?

SNEPP: I was just going to show William Buckley's -- one of his latest spy novels. William Buckley worked with the CIA. He doesn't clear his novels. I have to clear mine. For

12

some reason, there's a double standard there too. But he gives a pretty good reflection of the...

[Confusion of voices]

SNEPP: ...of the agency.

WHOLEY: Okay. "Stained Glass."

Thank you, Frank, for being with us today.